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# PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION.

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THE objects of the Proportional Representation Society are to secure a fair and just system of voting, under which the majority of the electors would obtain the preponderance of power; while at the same time the minority would secure a fair hearing. Neither of these objects are effectually provided for under the ordinary system of voting, which, as I shall hope to show, is uncertain in its operation, and may either, on the one hand, extinguish the minority, or on the other, actually give it a majority of the representation. Mr. Goschen, who has never joined our Society, in his speech on the second reading of the Franchise Bill, urged with great force the desirability of Proportional Representation as a provision for the protection of minorities. This, no doubt, is an important side, but it is only one side of the question. Proportional Representation is not only a safeguard to the minority, but it is also a security to the majority. Conservatives may look more to the former, Liberals will naturally do so more to the latter advantage. The advocates of mere majority voting, in their anxiety to extinguish the minority, really endanger the just preponderance of the majority; in grasping at more than is just they run the risk of losing even that to which they are fairly entitled.

The Society was founded by a few gentlemen who met together at 7, Clarges Street, shortly before the commencement of the Session. A notice was then inserted in the



papers, and a circular addressed to every Member of Parliament, the result of which was to elicit a most unexpected amount of support, and a meeting was then held, at which, after the election of officers, the following resolution was unanimously adopted—viz.: "That, without prejudging how far the principle may be subsequently carried out, it is indispensable, as a first step towards securing the true representation of the electors, that whenever a constituency returns more than two Members, some form of Proportional Representation should be adopted." The Society then appointed a committee to obtain information as to the different modes of voting which have been suggested or are in use, and to report to a future meeting. At present, in addition to other supporters, the Society comprises no fewer than 180 Members of Parliament, 93 of whom are Liberals.

We regard the ordinary system of voting as unsatisfactory, because it does not fairly represent the communities; it does not secure a majority of representation to a majority of the electors; it tends to violent fluctuations in the balance of political power, and renders the result of a general election to a great extent a matter of chance.

I will first attempt to show that it does not fairly represent communities. My friend Mr. Lefevre and others have argued that inequalities in one place are counter-balanced by opposite inequalities in another. But this is not so. Mr. Lefevre instanced the case of London. I am not sure that this case bears out his view. Still, there are, of course, such instances. But they are exceptional, and the reverse is more often the case. In the contested elections of Kent, for instance, the Liberals polled 32,000 votes, and the Conservatives 36,000, yet the Liberals only secured two seats out of 18. If we take a much larger area—say, the south-eastern counties, returning 99 Members to Parliament—the Liberals polled 96,000 votes, and the Conservatives 116,000, yet the Liberals only carried 15 seats, and five of these were in three-cornered constituencies, so that but for the limited application of Proportional

Representation, they would have only secured 10 seats of 99.

The next objection to the ordinary mode of voting is, that it does not secure to the majority of the electors a majority of the representation. Those who support it appear to be under the delusion that if constituencies were equalised the present mode of voting would—roughly, indeed, but surely—secure, that the majority of electors would rule the country. But this is not so. It sounds like a paradox, but it is nevertheless true, that a majority of electors in every constituency is by no means the same thing as a majority of all the electors. Suppose, for instance, a community of 60,000 electors is divided into three divisions, each containing 20,000, and that there are 35,000 Liberals and 25,000 Conservatives, the division might be, and very likely would be, as follows:—

	1st Division.	2nd Division.	3rd Division.
Liberals ...	... 17,000 .....	9,000 .....	9,000
Conservatives ...	... 3,000 .....	11,000 .....	11,000
	<hr/> 20,000	<hr/> 20,000	<hr/> 20,000

And thus, though in a minority, the Conservatives would actually return two members out of three. This is no hypothetical case, but really happened in Switzerland, and led to the revolution of 1846.

The ordinary mode of voting fails, therefore, in the essential object of securing to the majority their fair influence. Of course, if the constituencies were sufficiently numerous, then by the doctrine of probabilities these inequalities might neutralise one another; but this would only occur if we had many thousand, instead of a few hundred constituencies. The system of single seats has many great recommendations, but it would not secure this particular object.

In the next place, the present system renders the result of a general election to a large extent a matter of chance. In 1880 the Liberals carried over 90 seats by majorities of less than a hundred; in some cases by a mere handful

of votes. Take, for instance, South Norfolk, which we carried by one vote; Colchester, by two; Buckingham and Rye, by eight; Worcester and Tewkesbury, by nine. Five hundred votes differently given might have left the Liberals in a minority, and it is absurd to allow the destinies of a great country to depend on so small a number of votes. In the present Parliament we have 43 seats more than our votes would have entitled us to, while in 1874 chances were against us, and we had 56 too few. Thus in a House of 658 Members, chance has actually affected the balance of parties to the extent of 100 votes out of 650; and this, I need hardly point out, leads to violent fluctuation in the balance of political power. In fact, under the ordinary method of voting the minority may, at one election, have far more than their due proportion of representation, while at another, perhaps the very next, they may be almost extinguished.

But if, even now, the ordinary mode of voting is open to grave objections, and does not fairly represent the electors, this will be still more the case under the new Reform Bill. Liverpool, according to its population, will be entitled to, at least, six representatives. There is, I admit, much to be said in favour of dividing it into wards. But if this is not done, the City would return six Members as an undivided constituency. Now we know that political parties are very nearly balanced in that city; there are, perhaps, 32,000 Conservative and 31,000 Liberals, or *vice versâ*—it is difficult to say which, for at the last election the Liberals had a majority, while at the preceding one the Conservatives were victorious. Much depends on the Irish vote. Surely, it is manifestly absurd to give the 32,000 electors six Members, and leave the 31,000 altogether unrepresented.

Take, again, the case of Ireland. The Loyalists amount to one-third of the population; but, except in a very few places, they would be everywhere outnumbered. They are justly entitled to at least 33 seats; but, under the ordinary mode of voting, it is estimated that they would not secure more than half-a-dozen. To adopt a system under which one-third of



the electors would be unrepresented, would, under any circumstances, be unjust; but to devise a plan which places undue power in the hands of those who wish to destroy the union, and to silence those who desire to maintain the integrity of the Empire, would be an act of madness.

But then we are gravely told that to advocate a just and proportional system of representation is "but a new disguise for the old distrust of the people." How can this be? Under Proportional Representation the majority of the electors must return a majority of the representatives. The minority, indeed, would be secure of a hearing, but the majority would rule. Next time we are told that we show a distrust of the people, perhaps the speaker will condescend to explain how. The fact is, that if there be any distrust it is on the part of those who advocate an unfair and unjust system. It is manifestly reasonable that in any constituency the representatives should be in proportion to the opinions of the electors. That, if in a constituency returning six Members, two-thirds of the electors are Liberals and one-third Conservatives, four of the Members should be Liberals and two Conservatives. If five-sixths are Liberals, five of the Members should be Liberals. How does this show any mistrust of the people? It is clearly the fair and just system. If in such a constituency one-third of the electors are Liberals it is surely unjust that all the representatives should be Conservatives. A system which, in such a case, would give 32,000 electors six Members, and 31,000 none at all, is neither just nor representative.

But then it is sometimes said that though no doubt Proportional Representation would be perfectly fair, if it were general, it is unjust to the Liberal party that it should have been applied in a few large places only. But what are the facts? There are 13 constituencies in which the proportional system (though in an inconvenient form) has been adopted. Two of these—namely, Glasgow and Birmingham—return three Liberals. In the other 11 the representation is divided; but while we have the two seats

in three cases, the Conservatives have the majority of electors in eight.

There may be some doubt, perhaps, about one of these ; but it is clear that the minority system has given us either four or five seats more than we should otherwise have had. Liberals have, therefore, from this point of view, certainly nothing to complain of.

The next objection is that though the system may be theoretically perfect, it is, in fact, impracticable. There are, however, several modes of voting which give, more or less completely, a fair proportional representation. Of these the cumulative vote, the limited vote, the free list, and the single transferable vote are the best known, and the last-mentioned seems to be that which has the most numerous supporters. Under the single transferable vote, each elector would only have one vote ; but he would be allowed to mark as many candidates as he pleased in the order of his preference. Each voter, having one vote, would put the numbers 1, 2, 3, &c., opposite the names of the candidates, in the order of his preference for them. The vote will be counted to the candidate against whose name the figure 1 is placed ; but after any candidate has received enough votes to secure his election the vote will be given to the candidate marked number 2. The result would be that each party would carry its best man ; while whichever party was the stronger would also bring in its second candidate. This is surely as it should be, and Liverpool would, under this system, be fairly represented. Under a system of mere majority voting, on the contrary, the majority only, not Liverpool, as a whole, would be represented. Let us suppose, for instance, that two Liberals and two Conservatives were standing for three seats. Then each Liberal would place 1 and 2 against the Liberal candidates in the order of his preference. The Conservatives would do the same, and the result would be that each party would carry its strongest candidate, while whichever had the majority would also bring in the second. Under this system no dictation by agents or committees would be re-

quired, and leading statesmen would be sure of election. The system was recently tried by Mr. Arnold Forster in a Board School, and it was found that the school children understood it quite easily. Again, Mr. Bompas arranged for our Society to have 20,000 voting papers filled up, and then counted as they would be in an ordinary election. This was done without any hitch or difficulty.

Those who may wish to join our Society are requested to communicate with Mr. A. C. WHITE, at 9, Bridge Street, Westminster. We do not ask for money as a condition of membership, but are, of course, grateful for any donations. We maintain that Proportional Representation is the right, fair, and just system. It would free the electors from the dictation of committees or caucuses; it would give to minorities a fair hearing; and, lastly, by it, and by it alone, you can secure to majorities their just preponderance. If our opponents still deny this, we challenge them to point out the fallacy of our argument, and until they do this we confidently claim for it the support of all true Liberals.

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You lately did me the honour of inserting an article in which I endeavoured to prove that the *scrutin de liste* system of voting is uncertain in its operation, leads to violent fluctuations in political power, and fails to secure in Parliament a true representation of the people; and that under Proportional Representation, on the contrary, the House of Commons would be a true mirror of the country, our leading statesmen would be certain of re-election, the minority in the country would be sure of a hearing in the House, and last, but not least, the majority would rule. I ended by challenging contradiction on any one of these statements; and it is perhaps not too much to say that no refutation has yet been attempted.



Surely, then, a system which would secure such results, which would give us a really representative Government, is worth serious study. But if no refutation of our main position has been attempted, there have been expressions of opinion that our system is open to objection, mainly, I think, on three grounds, as to each of which I should be glad to say a few words, and I will take the letter signed "An Official Liberal" as a type of many others.

The objections are—1st, that it would put more power into the hands of agents and caucuses; 2ndly, that the electors would not understand it; 3rdly, that it is impracticable. As regards the first point, I will merely observe that so far from placing more power in the hands of caucuses and agents, the very reverse is the case. In fact, one of the advantages of the system is just that it would free the elector from dictation, and that is, I believe, the true reason why our proposals have met with such bitter opposition in certain quarters. The second objection is that the electors would never be brought to understand the system. Those who write and say that they cannot understand the proposal shelter themselves (and very naturally) under the veil of anonymous signatures. It would indeed be humiliating openly to confess such extreme obtuseness. Moreover, those who bring forward this argument seem to forget that we have already two forms of proportional representation actually in operation in this country—namely, the limited vote in the three-cornered constituencies, and the cumulative vote in School Board elections. No one ever alleged that the electors had any difficulty in understanding either of these, and we might, of course, adopt one or the other of them, but many of us think that there is a better system—namely, the single transferable vote. Now, in considering the simplicity or complexity of any proposed system we must draw a broad line between that which the elector has to do, and that which devolves on the returning officer. The first cannot be too simple. But as regards the latter we are dealing with skilled and trained officials. I shall, however, hope to show that the duty imposed even



on them would be simple enough, and such as even an average schoolboy would have no difficulty in carrying out. First, then, let us deal with the elector only. It is proposed that he should have one vote, but that he should be able to indicate the order of preference. Let us suppose, for instance, an election at Liverpool for three members, and that two Liberals and two Conservatives were in the field, each party endeavouring to secure two out of the three seats. The elector would receive his ballot-paper, say, as follows :—

BROWN.....		... ..
JONES .....		.....
ROBINSON .....		.....
SMITH .....		.....

All he would have to do would be to place 1 and 2 in the vacant spaces opposite the names of the candidates in the order of his preference. To say that this is beyond the comprehension of the average elector is really trifling. “An Official Liberal” is presumably in favour of the Franchise Bill, and surely any “capable citizen” who is fit to express a voice on the affairs of the nation can be trusted to perform so simple an operation.

I now come to the third objection, namely, that the system is impracticable. To that I oppose the conclusive answer that it has been done over and over again without hitch or difficulty. The instructions to the returning officer would be somewhat as follows :

1. The returning officer shall first ascertain the total number of votes given. By a sum in simple division he can then ascertain how many votes are required to secure the election of a candidate, and this number is called the quota.
2. The returning officer shall declare all candidates who have obtained the quota elected, and shall distribute the votes given for such candidate in excess of the quota to the other candidates who have not been declared elected in the order indicated by the voters.
3. This shall be repeated till there are no candidates having more than the quota.

So far as Proportional Representation is concerned we might stop here. There is, however, one other evil under the present mode of voting which our system enables us, if thought desirable, to neutralise—that, namely, which arises when too many candidates of one party insist on coming forward. All that would be necessary would be the following two additional clauses, which, however, is, I repeat, no necessary part of our system.

4. If the number of candidates still exceed by more than one the number of vacancies, the returning officer shall declare the candidate then having the least number of votes not elected, and shall distribute the votes given for him to the other candidates not already declared elected, according to the directions, if any, given by the voter, commencing with the voting paper having the lowest registered number. The returning officer shall declare elected any candidate whose votes during such distribution reach the quota.

5. This shall be repeated until the number of candidates exceeds by one only the number of vacancies. The returning officer shall then declare the candidates having the largest number of votes elected.

This will not seem complex to any one who will compare it with the duties imposed on corresponding officials under other Acts of Parliament.

One point still remains to be dealt with. It is alleged that under this system the selection of the votes to be distributed introduces an element of chance. But in the first place I must observe that there need be no elements of chance in the actual votes transferred. I believe, indeed, that in so large a number of votes as we shall have to deal with it would be practically fair to take simply the votes last counted. As a matter of fact, however, the voting papers being numbered, in our experimental election we took the voting papers bearing the highest numbers, *i.e.*, those last filled up. I should myself prefer in a real election to take those bearing the lowest numbers. In either case nothing would be left to the returning officer. But what is the extent of the chance?

It has been calculated out by Mr. Andrae, and again independently by Mr. Parker Smith. Suppose a candidate A has a surplus to be distributed, and that the second votes were given equally between B and C. If the surplus is 4,000 the average difference between B and C, supposing the papers to be taken at random, would not exceed 11 votes. The chances are 2,000 to 1 that neither would gain nor lose more than 60 votes. For all practical purposes therefore this can hardly be urged as a serious objection to the system.

We do not, however, allege that the system is perfect. On the contrary, we frankly admit that there is an element of chance, though to an infinitesimal extent, not indeed in the counting but in the result. But does not chance enter to some extent into all the events of life? Are there no chances in the present system of voting? Even in this respect we maintain that our system need fear no comparison. Moreover, it must be remembered that the element of chance, microscopical as it is, lies not between candidates of different parties, but between two almost equally acceptable candidates belonging to the same party. For instance, in the case I have taken above, a vast majority of the surplus votes taken from the first Liberal candidate would be given to the second. In all ordinary elections the votes split between a Liberal and a Conservative are a very small minority of the whole. But if between two candidates there is very little to choose, and the electors are all but evenly divided, then, from a national point of view, it cannot much matter which comes in; and, indeed, under any system of voting, the result would be very much a matter of chance. Without, then, denying the existence of an infinitesimal element of chance in the system, as in all other affairs of life, I must say *de minimis non curat lex*.

Moreover, I must once more repeat that proportional representation does not stand or fall by the single transferable vote system. Many of us think it the best, but the Free List has influential supporters, while the Limited

vote and the Cumulative vote are already in operation. They have some inconveniences which might, I think, be remedied; but at any rate they do give us, though somewhat roughly, a fair representation. For my own part, however, I think it has been already shown that there is not only no insuperable, but no substantial, difficulty in the matter; and I trust that Great Britain, the mother of Parliaments, may once more take the lead among the great nations of the world by securing for herself a House of Commons which shall really represent the nation.









